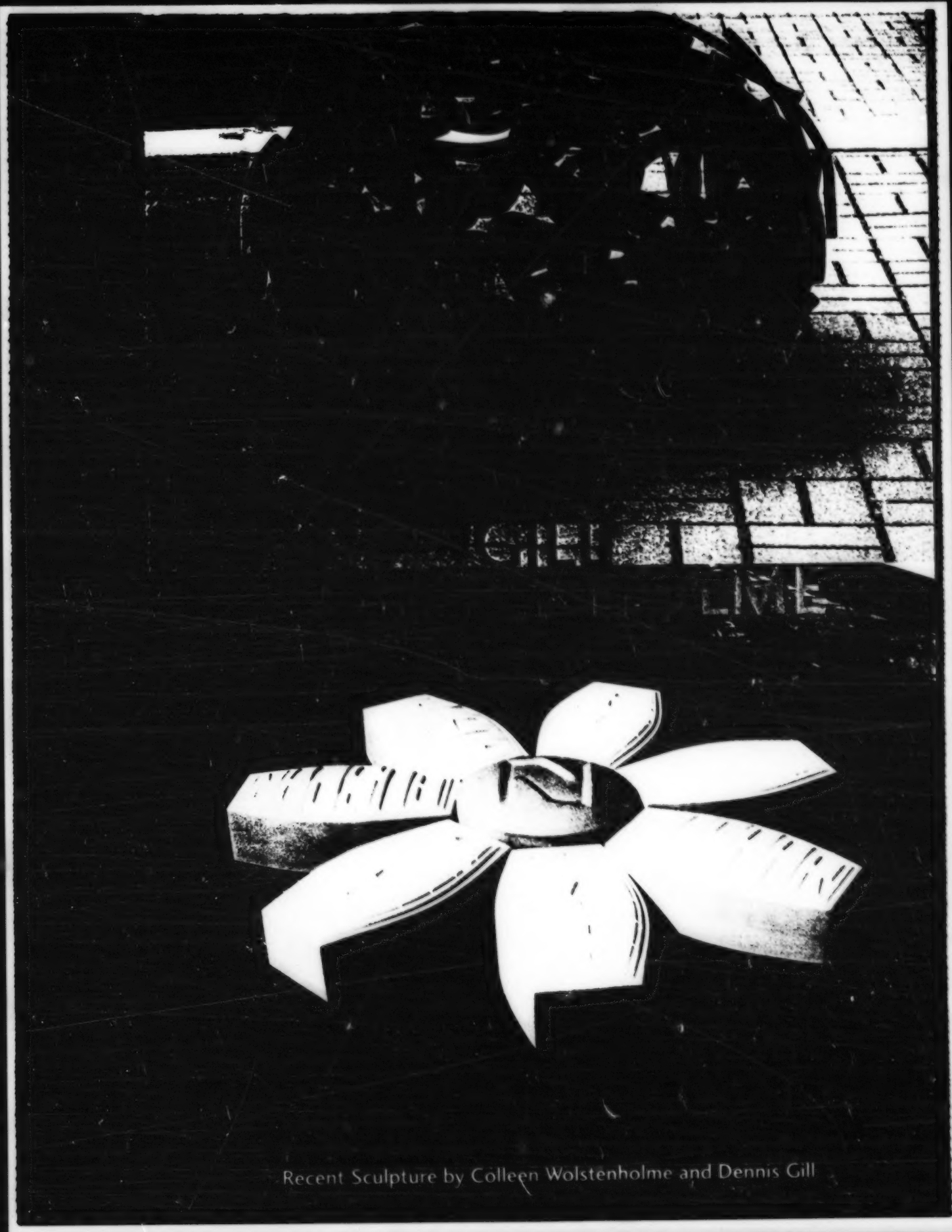

Recent Sculpture by Colleen Wolstenholme and Dennis Gill

Gill • Wolstenholme
Recent sculptures by
Colleen Wolstenholme and Dennis Gill

The Sculpture Gallery, Ondaatje Court
Aug. 3 – Oct. 27, 2002

Curator:
Ray Cronin, Curator of Contemporary Art

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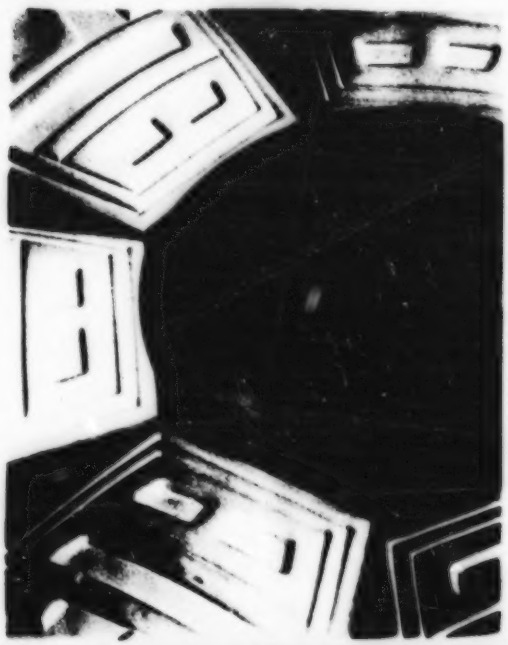
Cover:
Dennis Gill, *Snake Ball* 1995, steel, 79 x 92 x 92 cm
Coleen Wolstenholme, *Daisy* 2002 (detail below)
sculpture: cement, 21.5 x 138 x 138 cm
base: steel, outdoor carpet, 23 x 183.5 x 183.5



Director's Foreword

The Art Gallery of Nova Scotia welcomes the opportunity to present the second exhibition in our sculpture series on our Ondaatje Court. Gill / Wolstenholme showcases the wonderfully diverse talents of two well known and respected sculptors, and acknowledges the importance of this art form in contemporary Canadian art. Both artists provide a fresh approach to and a strong representation of the current thinking in sculpture and their ideas are forcefully presented. They have demonstrated their own personal convictions to their art which plays a special role in contemporary society. Dennis Gill and Colleen Wolstenholme have achieved recognition from the art community and from the general public for their accomplishments, and I wish them continued success with their work.

The regular series of sculpture exhibitions on our Ondaatje Court has been initiated by our Curator of Contemporary Art Ray Cronin and will be a regular feature of our exhibition program. I would like to thank Ray for bringing together another exciting selection of artwork, and for his insightful approach to the display and appreciation of contemporary sculpture. My thanks are extended to all Gallery staff who assisted in bringing this exhibition to you and for their ongoing efforts in presenting our programs to the public.

Thank you to the Canada Council for the Arts for its ongoing support of our contemporary art program and of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia.

We invite you to enjoy the work of Dennis Gill and Colleen Wolstenholme.

Bernard Riordon
Director and CEO

Acknowledgments

Dennis Gill:
I would like to acknowledge Rod's Machine Shop (Dartmouth NS) and Leroux Steel (Dartmouth, NS).

Colleen Wolstenholme:
I would like to thank Sue Wolstenholme for her studio assistance; Zeke Moores for his dedication to the installation; Robin Peck; Ray Cronin for his faith in my work; and The Canada Council for the Arts for the grant support that helped make it possible.

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Everything Changes

by Ray Cronin

"The snake is primarily a device that evidences the ever presence of change. I do not necessarily attempt to create a bias within the arrangements... that is to say I do not anticipate good or bad."[1]
Dennis Gill

"Everything changes so quickly it is difficult to solidify anything... I like to have the work anchored in an instant of recognition and then acknowledged as an illusion."[2]
Colleen Wolstenholme

Change is a constant, in life as in art. Under the rubric of modernism, change was eagerly sought after and progress was the standard by which art production was judged. "The new," whether shocking or merely novel, was the mantra that was supposed to lead to enlightenment. Now, we're less sure. Still modern, although we qualify our allegiance with excuses like "post" or "neo," we're a little bleary-eyed from the excesses of the "high" modernist party. We remember those days a little ruefully, with the particular clarity, and pretence to moral rehabilitation, of the massively hung-over. So we'll take a pill, and swear we'll never do *that* again. Until next time.

Both Dennis Gill and Colleen Wolstenholme allude to modernism's heady days of high theory and absolutes, each with their personal dosage of ironic detachment and wry recognition of the "masters." For both, the concept, the fact, of change is a touchstone, though not change for its own sake, or change as a matter of style or as a series of "firsts" or "lasts." Rather, change is individualized, is presented as something that directly affects the viewer. High modernism, on the other hand, was a little like academic history painting in its trumpeting of heroic themes. This later work eschews any allusions to universal truths. Here the path of the personal is the route of choice.

Images

Change is a constant, but that doesn't make it any easier to accept. Modernism's canonization of progress created many problems for the arts, not the least what to do with all the new problems of definition and style that kept cropping up. One such problem, for sculpture at least, has been the image. For sculptors the either/or dichotomy of image/object has weighed heavy. Whichever side one falls on the debate, there remains a lot of ground to cover.

Sculpture, as an art form, was more or less reinvented at the turn of the 20th century, refashioned by Auguste Rodin (1840-1917) and Constantin Brancusi (1876-1957), among others, from a genre mainly focussed on the representation of the human body (the statue), to a genre that has attempted to do away with the separation of the art from the viewer.[3] Modernist sculptors wanted to make objects, to make art that inhabited the same physical space, the same context, as both the viewer and the other constructed things of our material culture. Rather than representing an ideal, these sculptors wanted to create something *real*. Thus the weighty problem of the image.

Snake and Beam **1997, steel, 71 x 23 x 219 cm**

Representation is, by necessity, at a remove from the object or objects represented. As Plato pointed out, the idea of a chair is not the same thing at all as an actual chair. Representations, for Plato, and thus for much of Western history and culture, are shadows of the ideas, and only the ideas are *really* real. "Mere" things, in this philosophy, are always just representations, and the only debate is how far these shadows stray from the real.

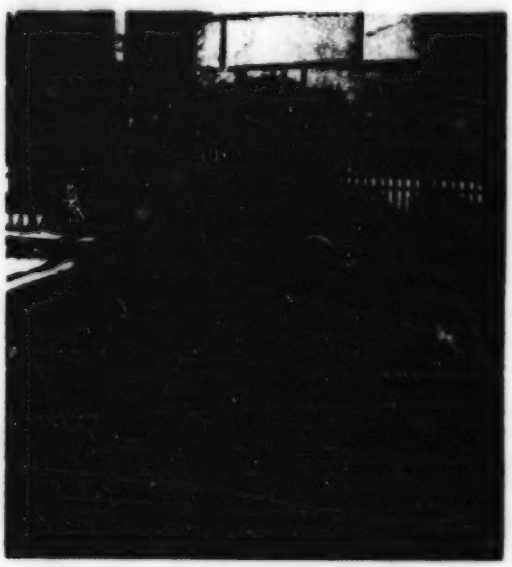
A neo-platonic spin was part of the impetus of Conceptual art. The reverberations of this almost forty-year-old art movement still felt in the art world, perhaps nowhere so clearly as in Halifax, the home of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD), one of Conceptualism's most successful, and enduring, laboratories. Early conceptualism, works by such artists as Lawrence Weiner, Dennis Oppenheim, Sol LeWitt, Garry Neill Kennedy and Iain and Ingrid Baxter's N.E. Thing Company, shared a desire to dematerialize the art object, to turn the thing in the gallery into an idea in the viewer's head. This was, in a way, the ultimate breaking down of barriers, and an example of an attempt at the utter democratization of art. No longer would art need to be in galleries or in museums, rather, in the words of an N. E. Thing Company button, "Art is all over." Ironically, this democratic impulse resulted in works with a reputation for being difficult and inaccessible to viewers. And, predictably, the art object reasserted itself with a vengeance.

Snakes

Dennis Gill studied at NSCAD in the heady conceptual days of the 1970s, and much of his earliest work shows evidence of his engagement in that discourse. Through his use of text, mirrors and found objects, Gill worked to distance his sculpture from the tradition-laden statuary that popular imagination then held, and still holds, to be sculpture. However, that distance never was so far as to do away with materials, or with things. Gill's sculpture, in fact, is marked by a remarkable, and a playful, sensitivity to materials. For Gill, the image has long been a part of his approach to the object, both as specific things or people (real and imagined): the Halifax Town Clock, Richard Nixon, Dick Tracey, Brancusi's sculpture "The Prodigal Son," and, repeatedly, the snake. In conjunction with his crafted things, Gill has also never balked at using found objects, if the material logic of a given piece will be served by such an addition.

Gill's use of images is never merely representational. Rather, his images function as objects, our initial attempt at reading them as we would a text stymied by their material presence, by their insistent, yet not aggressive, physicality. Snakes have a lot of baggage and no thinking artist could use them as content without being aware of their bad reputation. However, Gill sees snakes as evidence of change – leopards can't change their spots, but any snake in the grass can shed his skin. For Gill, for these sculptures, the snake is not a Christian admonition, but rather a postmodern signpost. This snake is not a reminder of "the fall," but rather a harbinger of change. Gill's snakes insist on the mutability of the sculpture itself, on the contingency of meaning, and on the specific relationship between viewer and object. Gill's "snakes" are actually one snake – a serial repetition of the same, non-specific form. Not a snake, then, so much as an idea embodied as a snake.

In Snake Ball and *Snake and Beam*, Gill presents the viewer with a paradox. It is, quite simply, hard to decide how to deal with these objects. The fifty identical (or nearly so) elements that make up *Snake Ball* will writhe like a mass of newborn snakes if one gives one's imagination free rein. Looked at dispassionately, the ball might be akin to an industrial part, a spring or filter whose mimicry of natural life is incidental to its (still mysterious) function. Perhaps it's part of some narrative – a tale missing a few pieces. This fluidity of meaning is brought up short by the piece. Faced with this object, with the dense weaving of the snakes, the warm, rusted surface of the steel, its physical presence, one can only react, not read. *Snake Ball*, unlike an industrial part, has no function beyond the change it may spark in the viewer, in its suggestion of a different way of dealing with objects in the world. At first glance, *Snake and Beam* seems more approachable, its liner structure more like a traditional text. The single snake is on its way somewhere, slithering off the beam into space. Yet, again, faced with the object, that reading falls apart.



Snake Ball 1995, steel, 79 x 92 x 92 cm

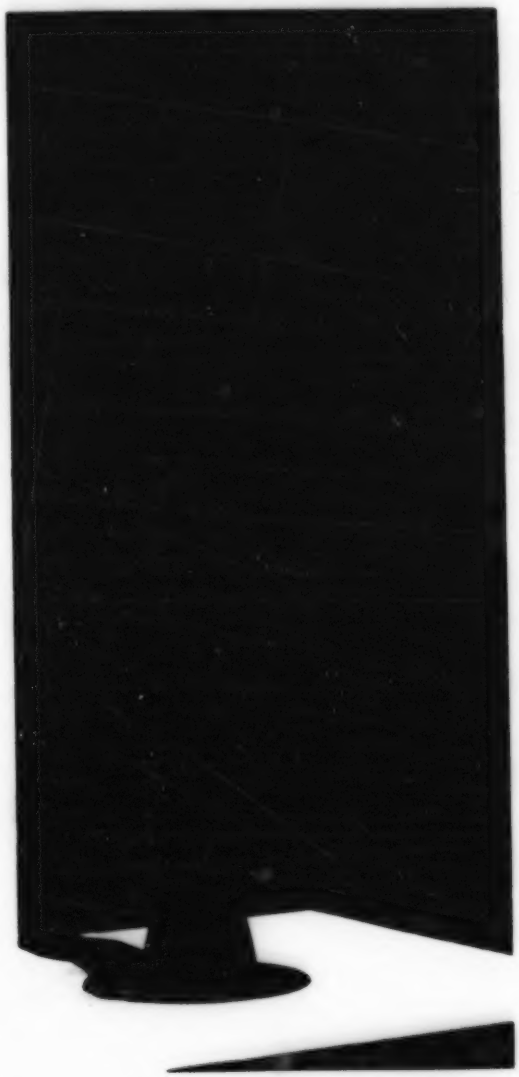
The snake, as a discrete unit, is juxtaposed with a massive section of I-beam, another unit, a base, but also part of the sculpture. A field in which the image happens, the I-beam, by its very presence, undercuts the separation of the snake from the rest of the world. It's just a piece of metal after all, as is the snake. His work steers our predilection for images onto new paths. It is the viewer that tries to read this work, and is thus frustrated in her desires. Our habits are deeply ingrained, no Western habit more so than our persistent belief that we can read, can translate into our language, the things of the world. An honest encounter with Gill's objects forces us to change our habits of response, to really look at the thing and not merely read into it our expectations.

Pills

Colleen Wolstenholme uses plaster, bronze and cement to create monumentally scaled pills, all of which are accurately detailed, fully recognizable renditions of anti-depressant, anti-anxiety, and anti-psychotic drugs, replete with the various trademarks and drug company logos that have become part of our pop culture: Valium®, Paxil®, Xanax®, Prozac®, Buspar® and more. The severe modernist designs of these pill shapes, their clean lines and slick typography, hark back to the design precepts of the Bauhaus. Yet her use of these forms owes as much to Duchamp's ready-mades as it does to late modernist sculpture. These are "found" objects, for all of the painstaking craft that goes into them. Wolstenholme has stated that she started making these pill sculptures when she realized that more and more of her friends were being prescribed these drugs, and when she herself was prescribed anti-depressants.

For Wolstenholme, there was something problematic in the notion of taking pills to solve what, for many people, are really issues of life style – it may be easier to take a pill than it is to change the things making one unhappy. Psychotropic drugs change behavior, they disrupt the patient's habitual, often self-destructive, response to certain stimuli. This, of course, is what art often aspires to do, to present a way of looking at the world that cuts through the assumptions we inherit with our citizenship in the modern age. Wolstenholme doesn't dispute the efficacy of her subject matter, but she does present a critical alternative to the essential passivity of prescribed change. Her newest works, *Column* and *Daisy*, are perhaps her clearest evocation of her stance to date. *Column*, an eight-foot high bronze sculpture depicting Buspar® tablets stacked end to end, references Brancusi's *Endless Column* in its form, while wryly commenting on both the addictive nature of the subject matter and the persistence of certain modernist tropes. *Daisy*, a cement sculpture made up of seven petals (again modeled after Buspar® tablets) and one central, yellow circle (the anti-depressant Amitriptyline Hydrochloride) suggests the promises of drug advertising, satirizing the "hearts and flowers" message of wellness. Wolstenholme thinks of her works as cautionary, as providing an alternative approach to being in the world.

Robin Peck has written of Wolstenholme's project that, "In contrast to the 'nothing is new' homily that terminally afflicts the conventional linear history of sculpture, she (Wolstenholme) understands that there is still much work to be done..."[4] There is indeed much to be done, and Wolstenholme's sculpture suggests that the work has to be shared by the sculptor and ourselves, that the job of transformation is a personal one. In a way, we too are material, and subject to our own form of



Column 2001, sculpture: bronze, 244 x 29 x 18 cm
base: steel, cement, 23 x 183.5 x 183.5 cm

material logic. A disjunction between what we think we know and what we experience, or between what we expect to see and what we get, is key to these works. The illusion that is recognized in these works is not of the sculptures, but rather our preconceived notions of what the sculptures are. Not pills, but bronze or cement, not a daisy but pills. Like Gill's snakes, these pills refuse to be pinned down, are ideas manifest in material, rather than signs on the way to meaning.

Column owes as much to Claes Oldenburg's (1929 -) pop infused works as it does to Brancusi's *Endless Column* at Tirgu Jiu, Romania, but it is Wolstenholme's own keen sense of irony that ties it all together. This work is both serious in its intent (Wolstenholme thinks of the labour involved as a healing process), and wry in its execution (the "endless" column of medication is surely somewhat tongue-in-cheek). The *Daisy* too, is steeped in irony, yet it is an irony won only at the cost of hard labour. That Wolstenholme's ironic take on art history is so hard-thought, and so unflinching of the artist's labour, means that the work avoids the merely cynical, instead making a genuinely critical statement that resonates on several levels. This work, and the works that precede it, are, as Robin Peck has described, "sculpture as an alternative healing process."[5] The labour of making these is key, both to the artist's reasons for making them, and to our eventual reception of the sculptures. This is the way things are, Wolstenholme observes, all the while holding that they can be better.

Making Things

In essence, these sculptures, all sculptures, are really about making things in the world. Both Wolstenholme and Gill use traditional sculptural practices (casting, carving, flame cutting, and welding) and a serial strategy that is both materials and labour intensive. The essence of a sculpture, as opposed to a tool or a piece of furniture, is that there is no remove from the object to the idea. Plato wrote that a chair exists before it is made as an idea in the head of the carpenter – the chair the carpenter makes is but a shadow of this other, *a priori* chair. These sculptures, on the other hand, only exist as ideas because they have been made, far from being shadows, they are the ideas themselves.

Heraclitus, perhaps the greatest pre-Socratic philosopher, said that change is the only constant ("All things are in flux..." – you can only step in the same river once, for the waters are always changing. Yet despite this, or perhaps because of it, there is still work to be done, processes to follow, illusions to shatter. Both pills and snakes can be more real than they seem, and less so as well. Like change, this paradox is neither good, nor bad, it just is.

[1] Dennis Gill, e-mail to the curator, 08/08/02
[2] Colleen Wolstenholme, e-mail to the curator, 06/25/02
[3] See *Passages in Modern Sculpture* by Rosalind Krauss (details) for a particularly cogent analysis of this historical shift, and the key role played by Auguste Rodin.
[4] Peck, Robin, "Scattered Across the Floor," C Magazine #61, February – April 1999
[5] ibid.

List of Works

height by width by depth;
all dimensions centimetres

Colleen Wolstenholme

Column 2001
sculpture: bronze
244 x 29 x 18
base: steel, cement
23 x 183.5 x 183.5
Collection of the Artist

Daisy 2002
(eight units plus base)
sculpture: cement
21.5 x 138 x 138 cm
base: steel, outdoor carpet
23 x 183.5 x 183.5
Collection of the Artist

Dennis Gill

Snake Ball 1995
steel, 79 x 92 x 92 cm
Collection of the Artist

Snake and Beam 1997
steel
71 x 23 x 219 cm
Collection of St. Mary's University Art Gallery

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